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SUBJECT: NORTHERN UNION PUSHES UNITY GOVERNMENT

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Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b & d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Secretary General of the Northern Union (NU) Dr. Ibrahim Lame met with PolOff on June 22 to discuss NU pressure on recent presidential aspirants Muhammadu Buhari (ANPP) and Atiku Abubakar (AC) to join a proposed government of national unity with President Umaru Yar'Adua. While no firm resolution has been achieved, the NU remains confident that the ANPP and AC will come on board in the interests of Nigeria. Backing Yar'Adua and allowing him the space to "distance himself from Obasanjo," the NU maintains, serves northern interests in the end. Dr. Lame emphasized that in discussions with the opposition, NU interlocutors have stressed that support for Yar'Adua does not equate to "favoring Yar'Adua, but rather protesting Obasanjo." By many indications, Yar'Adua is quickly gaining ground in co-opting prominent northern leaders and other opposition figures. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Dr. Ibrahim Lame, Secretary General of the Northern Union (NU), confided that since Yar'Adua's inauguration on May 29, the NU has been working assiduously to convince opposition leaders Muhammadu Buhari (ANPP) and Atiku Abubakar (AC) to join a government of national unity in the interests of all Nigerians. As a political lobby group, the NU has attempted to broker through "highly placed" northern interlocutors agreements between Buhari, Atiku, and Yar'Adua. While the media has reported progress on this front, Dr. Lame cautions that dialogue continues with no firm resolution to date. Dr. Lame added that while Buhari and Atiku (and the NU) concur that the elections were "fraudulent" as well as Yar'Adua's ascent to power, the "better course ahead" for the opposition is to "join forces with Yar'Adua." By forming a unity government, Lame declared, the opposition is not necessarily "favoring Yar'Adua, but rather protesting Obasanjo." He added that neither Buhari nor Atiku were asked to withdraw their election tribunal petitions.

¶3. (C) Although the Northern Union did not explicitly endorse any candidate, Lame insists, immediately following Yar'Adua's swearing-in the NU convened to decide whether to support Yar'Adua. Notwithstanding the poor conduct of elections, the NU moved to recognize the Yar'Adua administration in the "interests of the North." The NU contends that, ultimately, backing Yar'Adua serves northern

interests principally since his election has "helped to change the political landscape" in Nigeria by shifting power back to the North. A northern president, he added, "will re-direct the government to take a hard look at revamping the economy in the North." In order to take "tactical" advantage of current political fortunes, the NU maintains that "working with Yar'Adua" and allowing him to "initiate reforms" will strengthen appreciably the position of the North.

¶4. (C) When asked about Yar'Adua's handling of the national labor strike and related policies taken during Obasanjo's last days in office, Dr. Lame admitted that the NU preferred that Yar'Adua "distance himself" from Obasanjo by suspending the sale of Nigeria's oil refineries, increase in the value added tax, and fuel price hike. Instead, Lame bemoaned, Yar'Adua "walked into Obasanjo's trap," inheriting a government replete with problems. The extent to which Yar'Adua can surround himself with "competent" ministers will determine his success and ability to harness and maintain support from the North. Lame added that the NU is worried that Yar'Adua will "surround himself with Obasanjo's men, as evidenced by the recent appointment of David Mark." In such an event, Lame surmised, Yar'Adua acknowledges that "since he lacks popular legitimacy," he must "play along because he doesn't want to lose everything."

¶5. (C) Nigerian newspapers report that the PDP will meet with members of the ANPP and AC on June 26 to discuss bringing those parties into government, including reaching consensus on six ministerial slots President Yar'Adua has reportedly agreed to reserve for the opposition. The ANPP for its part has consented, through the stewardship of National Chairman Chief Edwin Ume-Ezeoke, to meet. While some in the ANPP have welcomed Yar'Adua's invitation to join government, Buhari still maintains that joining such a government would be disingenuous, and he continues instead to

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seek redress through the electoral tribunals. When asked what Yar'Adua could offer Buhari to entice him to join a proposed government of national unity Lame confessed that "short of electoral reforms, the man cannot be bought." On the other hand, Lame did conclude that recent talks between Yar'Adua and Atiku suggest a compromise is imminent.

¶6. (C) Dr. Lame explained that the Northern Union was established in 2005 to coalesce northern elite political opinion and address certain Obasanjo policies viewed as inimical to the growth and autonomy of the North. The NU, chaired by Kwara godfather Olusola Saraki, and comprised of governors, traditional rulers, academics, businessmen, and prominent civil society figures began approaching in mid-2006 the leadership of Nigeria's main political parties to persuade them each to put northern candidates forward for president. They stressed that if these parties desired northern support, they must concede to nominating northern candidates. The NU for its part also promised to "ensure" that the Vice President would emerge from the South South. Uniting disparate segments of the North and South, Lame opined, was widespread antipathy towards Obasanjo.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Dr. Lame, a former Senior Special Assistant in the Drugs and Financial Crimes Division under Obasanjo and later the Director General of the Buhari Campaign Organization, has oscillated between political allegiances, readily admitting that "you're in politics to win." The Northern Union, the organization he now represents, seeks to provide a political platform for the northern elite to reclaim some of the North's former glory. Unlike the more nonpartisan Arewa Consultative Forum (reftel), the NU is wholly invested in the current political process, unabashedly advocating the interests of the Yar'Adua government. In addition to Buhari and Atiku, we have heard that the Yar'Adua administration through its able Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF) Babagana Kingibe is courting other prominent northern leaders, including former

PDP founders.

¶8. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Rifts within the ANPP appear to be marginalizing Buhari and working in favor of Yar'Adua and the PDP. Embassy contacts close to Atiku intimate that private talks between Yar'Adua and Atiku indicate an agreement between them may be forthcoming. In such an event, Atiku will likely withdraw his election tribunal petition, which could weaken similar electoral challenges like Buhari's. Even if the opposition parties can be brought into government, the question remains whether a "government of national unity" will demonstrate a genuine commitment to moving forward on reform in Nigeria or, in effect, will simply amount to the stifling of meaningful opposition paving the way for a one-party system. END COMMENT.

CAMPBELL